

Redefining Academic Rigor: Documentary Film Making in the New English/Language Arts Classroom

by Jessica Dockter and Cynthia Lewis



Photo courtesy of Delaina Haug

Students conduct an interview for their documentary film, which takes them outside the walls of the classroom and school.

All students should have the opportunity to engage in complex intellectual activities, such as those that support deep knowledge and build on their cultural and linguistic resources. Sadly, given the current emphasis on student testing that has resulted in remediation and lowered expectations, such opportunities are often lacking for students in high-poverty, urban high schools.¹ Research in education, and the

field of literacy in particular, demonstrates that students from diverse social backgrounds perform better academically when classroom features include analytic thinking, substantive conversations with real-world audiences, and connections to the world beyond the classroom. In particular, in English/Language Arts classrooms, students are able to engage in challenging literacy tasks when exposed to complex intellectual activities (see sidebar, page 12). Despite previous research that has identified complex intellectual activities as key features of effective English/Language

Arts teaching and learning, additional research that explores how a rigorous curriculum plays out in classrooms as they function within high-poverty, urban high schools is needed.

The research we describe in this article seeks to fill that gap by closely examining student engagement in an English class with a rigorous curriculum in a high-poverty, urban school. Our research focused on a classroom in which the teacher is a veteran in the district who is committed to providing all students with opportunities for complex intellectual engagement. She

¹ B. Rubin, "Learner Identity Amid Figured Words: Constructing (In)competence at an Urban High School," *Urban Review* 39,2 (2007): 217–239.

Complex Intellectual Activities

Complex intellectual activities¹ engage students as thinkers and involve them in the production of knowledge. These activities are interactive and take place within the context of a rigorous and highly academic curriculum.² Examples include discussion-based approaches that encourage exploration and multiple perspective-taking,³ and the creative and critical use of knowledge that draws on students' identities.⁴ In the English classroom we studied, for instance, students were often asked to engage in and then critique various perspectives in discussions related to video texts such as Disney's *Pocahontas* or Kiri Davis' independently produced film *A Girl Like Me*. In another example, students were asked to build on an understanding of print narrative to produce a digital podcast memoir which included a complex layering of narrative and sound. Student performance is enhanced on academic tasks and on tests of basic skills when they engage in complex intellectual activities rather than those activities which merely require correct interpretations and predetermined conclusions.⁵

¹ F. Newmann, A. Bryk, and J. Nagaoka, *Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001).

² A. Applebee, "Rethinking Curriculum in the English Language Arts," *English Journal* 86,5 (1997): 25–31.

³ A. Applebee, J. Langer, M. Nystrand, and A. Gamoran, "Discussion-Based Approaches to Developing Understanding: Classroom Instruction and Student Performance in Middle and High School English," *American Education Research Journal* 40,3 (2003): 685–730.

⁴ E.B. Moje and C. Lewis, "Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Research," in C. Lewis, P. Enciso and E.B. Moje (Eds.), *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

⁵ A. Applebee, "Rethinking Curriculum in the English Language Arts," *English Journal* 86,5 (1997): 25–31.

uses a curriculum that is not a traditional literature-based curriculum, but is instead focused primarily on media analysis and documentary film production.

The goal of our study was to better understand the promises and pressures students and teachers face in urban high-school English classrooms, and to characterize how rigor and critical engagement are defined and enhanced through classroom talk and tools related to reading, writing, media analysis, and media production. We were also interested in the ways in which students' identities and the context of their schooling contribute to a rigorous curriculum. Ultimately, our goal is to influence educational policy regarding a "New English/Language Arts" curriculum as it attempts to redefine academic rigor with varied forms of text and students' participation in the production of knowledge. The research upon which this article is based was supported in part through a grant from CURA's New Initiative program. Additional funding was provided by the Spencer Foundation and the Margaret Virum Endowment.

Study Methodology

In this study, we observed a documentary film class in an urban high school in the Midwest during the 2007–2008 school year. The teacher was a White educator in a highly diverse English classroom in a school where 82% of the students qualified for free/reduced price lunch. The school was one of a number of low-status schools in this urban district and was nearly reconstituted, or given a "fresh start" with all new teachers, due to declining enrollments and low standardized test scores. The district enrolls more than 70% students of color and has one of the largest achievement gaps between White students and students of color in the nation.

The curriculum was not literature-based, but focused on media analysis and documentary film production in an English/history block that met state and district standards for both subjects. Students read and wrote as much as they would have in a typical English classroom, but did so in the process of analyzing and producing media texts, including collage, digital stories, podcast memoirs, and, ultimately, a

documentary film (one film per collaborative group; see sidebar, page 13). Although the population of students in the documentary film class that we studied shifted throughout the year, the class consisted of about 20 to 25 juniors and seniors who were primarily African American, followed by Latino, White, and American Indian; only one-quarter of the classroom's students were male. Many of the students in the classroom struggled in their other courses and attended an after-school program for low-income, first-generation college students. Of the nine focal students in our study, eight are currently attending a two- or four-year college—a higher percentage than for the general school population.

This study was qualitative in nature, and as participant-observers, we audio-recorded whole-class and small-group sessions three times weekly; video-recorded significant classroom events and projects; recorded field notes from each session; conducted formal and informal interviews with the teacher, students, and administrators; and conducted two focus-group discussions to include all students' perspectives. The nine focal students represented a range of achievement and engagement levels (based on test scores and initial observations), as well as a fair sampling of males, females, and all racial groups represented in the classroom. In addition, we collected all classroom assignments, selected student responses, and school and district artifacts (e.g., curricular frameworks, professional development materials, and school-board transcripts) related to the research questions. Throughout the 2007–2008 school year, as the teacher and students became more comfortable with our presence in the classroom, both teacher and students asked for our input and assistance in classroom projects, particularly at the end of the year as students worked on their final documentary films.

Our data analysis was interpretive in nature and involved open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Open coding of the data allowed us to explore possible themes, while axial coding involved identifying the most salient categories from among those themes. During this stage, we noted connections and contradictions which led to the combining and deleting of categories, as well as the creation of sub-categories. Finally, selective coding involved systematically arriving at

core categories central to the research questions. Because we were interested in how the classroom context shaped learning and engagement, we next identified key and illustrative events that occurred in the classroom for analysis. Key events were those that research participants identified as particularly significant. These events often stood out as moments of crisis or intense involvement or emotion in the classroom. Illustrative events were those that illustrate patterns and themes that emerged during the coding process. To understand these events, we applied critical discourse analysis, which provides a method for examining language use and patterns of participation. We were interested, for example, in patterns of talk related to initiating, controlling, and shifting of topics, as well as students' resistance to and acceptance of those language patterns. This close analysis of language allowed us to explore how the discourse of the classroom shaped social and power relationships, identities, and knowledge, and how each of these was shaped by the larger institutional contexts of school and community.² We were interested in how both teacher and students characterize rigorous, complex knowledge as it relates to their identities and the larger context of schooling in this English/Language Arts classroom that was centered on the analysis and production of documentary films.

The Curriculum

We asked the teacher whose classroom we studied to describe her motivation and the purpose for her curriculum, along with the units of study she uses. In our interviews and in a presentation she gave to a group of literacy teachers, she described her process for planning curriculum.

I start by asking myself, what motivates kids? And then I create something to meet them where they're at. I don't really start with the literature, or if there's a piece of literature I love and want to teach, I think first, will this motivate the kids and how can I teach this? ... I know I love it. I need them to love it because what is wrong in our educational system is that kids are dead like zombies in the classroom, and I can't stand that. I have kids who say, "This is the only class I make sure to get my butt out

of bed for because I know I need to be in this class." Then that's a good thing. That's when you've got what you need to be doing.

The teacher created the documentary film class, then, not based on district standards or "best practices" in the English/Language Arts field (although we argue that she does align with findings in the field), but in response to the need for increased motivation, engagement, and attendance in her urban classroom. After 13 years of teaching, she moved from a literature-based curriculum to one focused on digital media and production, although she admitted to us in interviews that teaching through technology tools had never been her primary interest. Seeing how this shift motivated her students, however, encouraged her to develop a curriculum with several goals in mind:

- **Allow for a high degree of personal control.** Students chose topics for the production pieces throughout the year (collage, podcast, film, etc.), developed significant questions to ask in each project, identified their sources, and determined the best way to deliver their message. In our observations, students received this responsibility with thoughtfulness and care, particularly when it came to checking out equipment for their projects. Even more, students demonstrated a commitment to topics that mattered to their own identities. According to the teacher, "kids ... steer towards things that they need to figure out related to their own identity."
- **Allow students to build their own understandings.** Because the films emerged from students' passions for an issue, the students often had biased notions of what they would discover upon researching a topic and interviewing community members. Yet, in almost every film group, students ended with a more complex notion of their topics than they initially had, and some even developed a thesis opposite to that with which they had begun. These moments were exciting for the teacher, and she described in an interview that the power of the course was in "creating your own truth rather than having someone tell you what to think."
- **Allow students to collaborate in meaningful ways.** Students spent

Student Films

Student groups in the class produced five films on a range of topics:

- *Going Green: Global Problems, Local Solutions*
- *Opening Doors, Opening Minds: High School Students Who Travel Abroad*
- *Giving Voice to the Voiceless: A Story of Developmental Disabilities*
- *Anything He Can Do, She Can Do Too! Women in Non-Traditional Occupations*
- *Stereotyping Success: The Story of Alternative Schools*

the last three months of the school year working together on their film projects, a collaboration that was unlike small-group work most had experienced in their other classes. They outlined for themselves the tasks to complete and the roles each would take toward meeting their goal. Although this process was accompanied by some frustration over the time they worked together, the authentic collaboration held them accountable to each other and to the purpose they had determined together.

- **Include authentic audiences and consequences.** The course culminated in a film festival at the end of the school year that parents, administrators, students, and community members attended. Although the teacher evaluated the film as part of the course requirements, students indicated in their interviews that having an authentic audience view and critique their work was a significant motivation and source of pride. As one student stated, "My family is coming and I want to feel proud of it. I did a movie with my group, right? I tried to work as hard as I could and make the best movie and everything so my mom will be proud of me."
- **Create real-world connections for students.** Many teachers talk about making real-world connections for their students without ever leaving the classroom walls. In the last months of school in the documentary

² N. Fairclough, *Language and Power* (New York: Longman, 2001).



Collaboration is central to the learning in this course; students are accountable to each other and their final media products.

film class, on any given day a group of students might be out in the community conducting an interview, filming at a location related to their topic, or making calls to set up their next appointment. Many students expressed that this interaction with community members, many of whom were respected professionals in their fields, was both one of the most challenging and one of the most rewarding aspects of their project, and one that we believe empowered them as active community members.

- **Have a high degree of rigor, which encourages critical and creative thinking.** Students moved from critically analyzing media throughout the year to producing their own documentary films. This partnering of the critical with the creative throughout each aspect of the curriculum encouraged students to view themselves in the world differently and to take a participatory role in the production of messages and images for larger consumption. Furthermore, as students incorporated their historical research into the films, they had to rethink and re-engage earlier discussions from the course around questions of history, truth, and art.

With these curriculum goals in mind, the process that the teacher used for each unit in the first several months of the

school year was similar. Students first accessed multiple media texts and genres that served as examples, such as David Isay's *Ghetto Life 101* for the podcast memoir and Mark Achbar's *The Corporation* for documentary film. Second, students critically analyzed those texts for how technical elements position viewers to believe, feel, or think in certain ways. Often, these discussions engaged students around controversial topics, such as corporate ethics or racial representation, and the teacher used a form of "accountable talk," which emphasizes the use of evidence and active participation/ listening to help students develop ways of discussing issues with multiple, often emotional positions. Third, students created, shared, and reflected on their own media projects (visual art, essays, photography, audio diaries, and film). Each aspect of this curriculum scaffolded technical, artistic, and critical-thinking skills, and focused on analytic thinking and deep knowledge, with the intention of developing a complex intellectual base for the culminating creative project of the year: the documentary film.

Study Findings

This section summarizes our findings from interviews with individual students and focus groups related to student motivation and engagement in academically challenging literacy tasks. We have discussed findings from key

events and classroom interaction in other reports of this research.³

Throughout the coding of our data, the following themes emerged in student responses to our interview questions about the documentary film class:

- The course was the most *intellectually challenging* one they have had.
- The course was the *hardest* work they have been asked to do in school.
- They felt *respected* and *believed in*.
- They valued the *authentic audience* and feeling of *competence* when they met their goals.
- They felt *empowered* to connect with their *identities, communities, and interests* outside of school.

Hard Work and Intellectual Challenge. In comparison with their other courses, students described the documentary film class as the most intellectually challenging and hardest one they had taken in their years of schooling so far. Throughout interviews, both individual and focus groups, students described their thinking in the class as "deep," as "looking beyond," and as "going farther." Those responses reflected exactly the kind of thinking that the teacher explained that she expected from her students from the start of the year. This language of "depth" of thinking, as well as the course being special and "sacred," to use a term from the teacher, became instilled in students' thinking, and more importantly, in their literacy activities. Participants stated:

Yeah, it makes you think harder because ... every step of the way, she makes you think.... It's so many steps to get to where you've got to go, so it keeps you thinking. You're never bored in that class; basically, you work and work—she never just tells you to be quiet ... and read a book, or something. She don't. She has you working, and learning.

She always uses the example, "Don't just scratch the surface ... dig deeper,

³ C. Lewis and J. Dockter, "Mediascapes and Social Worlds: The Discursive Construction of Critical Engagement in an Urban Classroom," paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English, San Antonio, TX, 2008; and C. Lewis and J. Dockter, "Identity, Media, and Institution: The Shaping of Critical Engagement in an Urban Classroom," paper presented at the National Reading Conference, Orlando, FL, 2008. Both papers are available from the authors upon request (Jessica Dockter at dock0059@umn.edu or Cynthia Lewis at lewis@umn.edu).



A student edits footage in iMovie. Many students, like this one, put in long hours before, during, and after school in anticipation of the film festival.

go deeper.” It’s kind of like you are digging a hole and you’re planting something.

She hands out more questions, and she asks questions that most people wouldn’t ask so that you can, like, look at different parts of it, and she has students say what they think ... and then everybody says something different and then you, like, look past what you think.

This notion of going deeper reflects the curriculum goals, but also stems from a particular disposition of the teacher and a goal to “create thinkers.” Although students joked in focus groups about having to rewrite papers and start projects again, they also indicated that they would not change this about their teacher or their class.

Believing in and Respecting Students. The students’ perceptions of the intellectual challenge of the course and the prospect of hard work go hand in hand, we found, with the teacher’s belief in and respect for the abilities and identities of her students. When we asked students why they felt the teacher had pushed them so hard in the course, several of them described her understanding that they could “do more” than had previously been expected of them. One participant shared:

I think she’s tough on us because she knows that we can do more than what people probably have done in the past. So she’s trying to get that out of each individual student, to get their—the capability. I think that’s what she really likes, because she’s a pusher. She wants everything to come out through deep expression, feeling, you know?

This deep expression and feeling ties back not only to the curriculum goals of the course and the students’ responses regarding the course’s intellectual challenge, but also to what one student described as “pushing,” which meant that the teacher made her work beyond the point at which she would otherwise give up or felt she had completed a project. Another student stated:

I mean, she made you work. She’s not going to settle for less and she’s going to get the best out of you. I think that’s a good thing. But yeah it’s a real tough class. You’ve got to be there.

Here, this student implied that the rigor of the course and the teacher expecting—and getting—the best out of him meant having to “be there.”

The students’ perceptions were in keeping with the teacher’s intentions. Respect was key to this teacher, and

she believed that the documentary film class provided the students a chance to respect their own abilities. As she put it:

When they get the camera and they get out there, they start to feel very powerful and they feel like they can actually participate, and it’s hard for teenagers to feel that way because they don’t ever get respect out in the real world.

As mentioned earlier, the school’s low status based on declining enrollments and test scores intensified the need for students to feel respected. The teacher’s keen sense of this broader institutional context served as an important backdrop to her strong belief that her students were intelligent, creative, and able to achieve. Her classroom talk often referenced the need for students to confound the expectations of others by challenging themselves to work harder and with more passion than they typically might in school. She told her students during the first week of school:

If your teachers let you do nothing and get a passing grade, you are being disrespected.... You shouldn’t be mad at me right now, you should be grateful because I expect something of you, because I know you can do it, OK?

She often explained to students that this class offered them opportunities not typical of most urban schools but rather more akin to the kind of course offered in suburban schools, thus using that institutional context to propel the push and the tough stance that the students referenced in interviews.

Authentic Audience and Feeling Competent. As mentioned earlier in this article, a significant aspect of the documentary film class revolved around producing products for authentic audiences. Not only was this a motivating factor for the final films, but it also played out in students’ interactions with community members and in their desire to represent themselves and their school in positive ways. Students indicated that having an outside, real-world audience view and critique their work allowed them to display their competence and demonstrate their abilities to those who had perhaps, at other times, dismissed them as apathetic and incapable of complex thinking. In interview responses, students stated:



Students chose their own topics for the film projects, and often their focus would shift as they gathered and analyzed footage together.

Well in a film, you feel like you are just letting it out in a different way [from writing] ... You expect what you're trying to send out to the audience to actually come out and alter their different senses so they can react from it. In writing it's very different—it's just brain stimulating.

[The podcast] was motivating because it was very exciting and I wanted it to be just about perfect because it was going on the Internet. You want to try and do your best if it's going to be on the Internet because you wouldn't want something to be—you wouldn't want to embarrass yourself.

Ms. [teacher's name], she's a very good motivator. She motivated me about this class. Just the thought about what's going to come out in the end of it—just thinking about, "Oh, when the movie is done, what if I go into a film festival? What if I won an award?" I can show this to a college, and maybe I can get a scholarship ... I've been thinking about that a lot; maybe I could use this movie. I could put on my transcript that I've taken literature and film ... I can tell that I made a movie. Then I can send them the movie and they can see what kind of good work I do.

Audience meant something different for each of these students, but they communicated in their own words how the film project allowed them to demonstrate competence and change the way outside viewers think about issues, as well as the students themselves.

Agency, Identity, and Interests. A final theme that emerged from students' interviews was the significance of agency (students' capacity to act and make choices), identity, and students' interests. Each of the topics for the final films developed from students' concerns in their families, communities, school, and lives. One student, for example, made connections across texts and assignments to her own life. Recalling her reading of Brent Staples' essay, "Black Men and Public Space," she articulated the impact of the piece on her film project (living with disabled family members) and her own experience as a teen mother. She stated:

You can't predict everything. You can't, because we were predicting bad about this man ... He wasn't even a bad person. He was a regular, nice man that was in the Army and we predicted everything. Like how they predict [about] the disabled kids. Like something's really wrong with them, but when they get to know them, they're just like us. They've just got something different, and ... people just judge me a lot in this world, and it's crazy. Like when people say, you've got a baby already and you're only 16. If that's what I wanted to do—I didn't try to, but it happened, so I can't change it now. And then, like, so I don't care what people say no more.

As a young African American woman, the article challenged her to question her own assumptions about the Black man she read about, while also pushing her to challenge others' assumptions through the products she created. In this way, the texts, projects, and students' identities aligned in critical and creative ways to empower students as both consumers and producers of media.

We also found in our observations and interviews across each of these themes that the teacher used language that represented her students as strong and able to act in the face of disempowering discourses related to the school's marginal status and the perception of the students as "at risk." In interviews, students responded positively to

the teacher's consistent and frequent language about rigor and imagination, the responsibility to take up opportunities often not available in under-resourced schools, the pride of showing others what you can accomplish (especially those who do not believe in you), and the importance of having passion for issues and ideas. Each of these, along with the critical and creative goals of the course, suggested to students that they had the resources, skills, and passion to contest negative public and community discourses related to urban schools and poverty.

Redefining Academic Rigor: Critical (Media) Literacy

Given an increasingly visual and global culture, young people must develop the capacity for critical citizenship so that they can "read" the linguistic, visual, and aural signs and symbols that inundate their lives, both public and private. Preliminary findings from our study indicate, we believe, the need for English/Language Arts curricula in urban classrooms that actively involve students in the production of knowledge through complex literacy tasks, such as:

- ▶ critical analysis of media related to students' identity negotiations;
- ▶ digital media production for authentic audiences of peers and adults in the community;
- ▶ patterns of classroom interaction to communicate high expectations and accountability to the classroom community; and
- ▶ detailed and rigorous feedback at critical moments to support student learning and the belief in their own capacity to achieve.

Each of these tasks must be accompanied by new definitions of what can be considered a text and new ways of responding to texts using digital tools. More and more, youth expect that the texts they read will serve the purposes of identity representation and affinity building (e.g., spoken word, fanfiction, zines, and online journals), and English/Language Arts curricula must respond to this expectation while establishing a critical rigor that challenges students' perspectives. Meeting this expectation also means more access to what Jenkins called *participatory culture*⁴ (usually

online or through mobile technologies) that crosses race, class, gender, age, religion, and nationality as an outgrowth of globalization. This access also has consequences for young people's expectations about and responses to the texts they read and view. Finally, we believe a greater need exists for a critically literate public in the face of all of the above.

This study demonstrated that critical literacy is about more than critical analysis. It is about critical engagement. We have found that engaging students in media production creates the conditions for critical engagement through acts of intensely involved participation and immersion. Such immersion comes with an emotional intensity that is uncomfortable for many teachers, in that passion is not often equated with "best practices" in school. In our earlier reports of this research, which presented more theoretical work related to this study, we described how the teacher's highly emotive stance and passion for ideas positioned students as critically engaged learners.

A course such as this one required a considerable amount of work on the teacher's part, as well as a consistent belief that her students would respond to academic rigor that challenged and supported their talents and abilities with real-world consequence for their success. Other educators interested in a similar curriculum focused on digital media production must consider available resources and time, as the teacher we studied wrote several grants each year to obtain funds for needed technology. Additionally, we believe strongly that such a curriculum was successful because the teacher viewed technology as a *vehicle* to students' critical engagement, not as an end in itself. Based on our active involvement as participants and observers in this classroom, the school principal (at the urging of the teacher and a dean) asked us at the end of our study to direct the university part of a partnership between the high school and the University of Minnesota. We have helped to start a small learning community, initiated in the fall of 2009, that focuses on a college preparatory curriculum through the use of digital media analysis and production in four core subject areas. Teachers and University partners in the program work as a team to create interdisciplinary multimedia projects at each grade level to encourage authentic learning and real world application of skills and knowledge across the curriculum. Our aim



This visual collage project is a scaffold to the critical and creative thinking students engage in throughout the course. Often, students' negotiation of their own identity became the focus of their academic work.

was, and continues to be, to increase student engagement and achievement in a high-poverty urban high school, with the goal of using best practices to promote educational equity and relevancy. Through this new program, we hope to engage diverse students in rigorous reading, writing, critical thinking, and creating through the use of digital media for authentic purposes and audiences.

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⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).